

## **Developmental Level Park Ranger Interpreter**

### **MODULE 230**

#### **Title: EFFECTIVE INTERPRETIVE WRITING\***

Recommended prerequisite: Module 101

#### **PURPOSE**

Development of clear interpretive writing is critical to public comprehension of park issues, themes, and values. To achieve quality interpretive writing, it is important to write effectively for various audiences and media. Good interpretive writing provides memorable images and ideas that facilitate connections between audiences and resources. These connections can occur before, during, after, or instead of an actual visit. More than a set of mechanical skills, interpretive writing is based on philosophical and ethical underpinnings which move audiences toward stewardship and care for the resource.

This module seeks to provide a framework for professional development as an interpretive writer. It defines interpretive writing as a continuously evolving skill of the professional interpreter, provides guidance for creating written products, and offers developmental suggestions. This module does NOT convey basic writing mechanics or other fundamental skills.

#### **AUDIENCE**

Individuals with writing responsibilities in National Park areas including park rangers and other NPS staff, cooperating association employees, volunteers, concessionaires, and park partners.

**OBJECTIVES** At the end of this module, learners will be able to:

- Describe the process of writing;
- Write for different types of interpretive media;
- Describe implications of copyright and libel laws, agency position, public domain, and bias.

#### **TOPICS**

The writing process; types of media and audiences; elements affecting professionalism including plagiarism, libel, and bias.

## **DELIVERY**

Park and cluster-level training; university courses; traditional and distance learning; workshops; peer coaching and mentoring; self study.

## **BENCHMARK COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT**

An original writing sample for a specific written medium, including a statement of intended audience, will be submitted for certification.

## **COMPONENTS**

- [\*The Writing Process\*](#)
- [\*Writing for Interpretive Media\*](#)
- [\*Professionalism\*](#)

**TARGET**      Within 2 years of appointment.

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<http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/230/module.htm>

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# **Assessment Rubric for Developmental Benchmark**

## **Competency:**

### ***Effective Interpretive Writing***

**Demonstrates certification standards: The submitted written interpretive product is:**

**--successful in creating an opportunity for the readers to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with meanings/significance inherent in the resource;**

**AND**

**--appropriate for the audience, and provides a clear focus for their connection with the resource(s) by demonstrating the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, rather than relying primarily on chronological narrative or a series of related facts.**

Descriptors:

- \* Communicates an appropriate depth and amount of relevant information
- \* Communicates an understanding of resources/park story/national significance
- \* Provides a balanced treatment and acknowledges multiple points of view
- \* Is presented in an engaging style appropriate to the audience and medium
- \* Demonstrates creativity
- \* Encourages or moves audience toward higher-level concepts, such as resource protection, stewardship, and global issues as appropriate
- \* Incorporates thematic structure and organization
- \* Avoids spelling, grammatical, typographical, and stylistic errors which impede understanding and interpretive effectiveness

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**Approaching certification standards: The submitted written interpretive product may be:**

**--successful in creating an opportunity for the readers to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with meanings/significance inherent in the resource;**

**OR**

**--appropriate for the audience, and provides a clear focus for their connection with the resource(s) by demonstrating the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, rather**

**than relying primarily on chronological narrative or a series of related facts.**

**OR NEITHER.**

Descriptors:

- \* Communicates an inappropriate depth and amount of relevant information
- \* Partially communicates an understanding of resources/park story/national significance
- \* Attempts to provide a balanced treatment but insufficiently acknowledges multiple points of view
- \* Style is less than engaging or inappropriate to the audience or medium
- \* Insufficiently encourages or moves audience toward higher-level concepts, such as resource protection, stewardship, and global issues as appropriate
- \* Lacks thematic structure and organization
- \* Contains spelling, grammatical, typographical, or stylistic errors which impede or compromise interpretive effectiveness

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# PREPARING YOUR SUBMISSION: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

## *"Effective Interpretive Writing\*"*

Complete and submit the attached "Product Submission Registration Form" for each certification you attempt. For this certification, submit original *interpretive* text for any of the media listed below, and ***attach a statement describing the intended audience***. The product must be *your original work*, and developed for a written medium, and *not* intended to serve another format, such as a narrative script or program that would be spoken. The text should be of the length appropriate for the medium selected. This competency measures your *interpretive* writing effectiveness *only*. Therefore, several important considerations should be kept in mind. First, you must submit a piece for review captures the interpretive elements as described in Module 101 of the curriculum, and are echoed in the assessment rubric attached for interpretive writing. Regardless of how well written, a purely informational piece will not meet the certification requirements. Second, the text should be one article, section, or portion of text that is cohesive and stands alone. Lastly, basic writing mechanics are assumed, and, as with basic presentation techniques in the interpretive talk certification, are NOT being measured in the competency review. However, if you do not possess basic technical writing skills, you are urged to find developmental opportunities that provide those skills before beginning preparation for this certification, so that distractions to the reviewers and intended audiences are minimized.

Examples of writing products:

- interpretive brochure
- interpretive site bulletin
- interpretive wayside
- park newspaper interpretive article
- staff briefing paper on an interpretive topic
- interpretive article for a local publication
- interpretive correspondence regarding a resource-based complaint or question

Or a portion of:

- indoor interpretive exhibit text
- interpretive trail guide
- interpretive guidebook
- web site (interpretive text only)

NOTE: Photos, illustrations, and other graphics sent along with the text are not part of the review. Again, you may choose any of the above formats, as long as the intent of the writing is *interpretive*, not informational.

Before you submit your product, be sure to check your work against the assessment rubric. Remember--each bold-faced "stem statement" of the rubric must be satisfied to achieve certification in this competency.

The professional development program assumes good faith effort throughout each step in the review process. All accuracy, appropriateness, and authenticity are the responsibility of the employee and supervisor. Once you have reviewed the writing submission with your supervisor, you have two choices to submit your materials:

1) Electronic mail via CCMail (preferred): **Dahlen, Dave**

--OR--

2) Hard copy surface mail: **Training Manager for Interpretation, Mather Training Center, P.O. Box 77, Harpers Ferry, WV 25425 Attn: Product submission**

If you send hard copy, please include THREE copies to expedite the processing of your product.

- Certification in this competency serves the overall development of employees in Ranger Careers positions, and meets the NPS national standard for interpretation in interpretive talks. Certification in this competency is a point-in-time assessment. Long-term performance trends are measured at the park level. Eligibility for promotion is determined by the supervisor and park.

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Product Submission Registration Form

Interpretive Development Program Certification Program

Name:

Park/Site:

Module #

Date mailed:

This is my \_\_\_\_\_ submission attempt for this certification (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, etc.)

I have reviewed the enclosed product against the submission requirements AND rubric for this certification    Yes    No

Has supervisor reviewed product?    Yes    No

GS-0025?    Yes    No

Permanent/term/seasonal/volunteer, other:

FedEx mailing address and phone number:

Email address:

Park phone:

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## Component for Module 230

# The Writing Process

### PURPOSE

This component explores writing as a craft, and as a process with identifiable steps. Writers at all skill levels may use knowledge of this process to improve their ability to create professional interpretive writing.

### OBJECTIVES

At the completion of this component, the learner will be able to:

- describe the writing process and use it to enhance writing ability;
- use the revision step, including peer and other editors, to improve drafts of interpretive writing projects

### APPROACH

Familiarity with the steps of the writing process helps writers form intellectual and emotional connections with the topic, regardless of whether it was chosen or assigned. With a better understanding of the writing process, individuals can come to feel a sense of ownership and control over their writing ability. With practice, self-evaluation, peer editing, and coaching, interpreters can become better writers.

This component refers to the concept of tangible/intangible connections introduced in [Module 101--Fulfilling the NPS Mission: The Process of Interpretation](#).

Not all good writers use the same techniques. A basic writing model is outlined here in four steps. Awareness of this model can help writers analyze their own strengths and weaknesses. The model builds on the basic structure of interpretive presentations (see *Module 103 components: Talk Organization; Interpretive Program Research; Themes, Goals, and Objectives; Presentation Techniques; Delivering an Interpretive Talk and Assessing Its Interpretive Value*), along with other skills specific to writing. The four-step model focuses on the importance of logical progression in writing.

### CONTENT OUTLINE

#### Steps of the Writing Process\*

I. Pre-writing: short (5-10 minute), unstructured warm-up preceding a writing project; helps you loosen up and begin the idea flow.

II. Drafting: the first effort to organize your thoughts  
(includes the following in an order you prefer)

--theme statement

--tangible/intangible links and universal concepts

--transitions

--complete sentences and paragraphs

--audience(s)

--medium

III. Revising: through self and peer review, analyze and improve your writing; use editors.

A. Personal style

1. your personal style is an asset

2. limitations and realities of using your personal style

B. Editorial style

1. review your own work

2. peer review

3. value of outside editing

IV. Publishing: any time a final product is delivered to an audience (the audience can be your supervisor, visitors, coworkers, etc.); the opportunity to use audience feedback to improve your effectiveness at delivering the interpretive message.

\*See ["Supplemental Reading and Activities for Module 230"](#)

## RESOURCES

### *The Creative Process*

*A Writer's Time*. Atchity, Kenneth, W.W. Norton: New York, NY, 1995. One of the best overall books on the importance of pre-writing and how to write for different media.

*Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*. Gerard, Philip. Story Press: Cincinnati, OH, 1996. Excellent reference on how to find a topic, conduct research and interviews, decide form and style, and produce writing.

*Description: How to Engage Reader and Keep Stories Moving*. Wood, Monica. Writer's Digest Books: Cincinnati, OH, 1995. Excellent tips on "showing" versus "telling," helps writers incorporate motion, dialogue, points of view, and personal style.

*Freeing Your Creativity: A Writer's Guide*. Cook, Marshall J. Writer's Digest Books: Cincinnati, OH, 1992. Discusses personal style, contrasts standard writing types, such as technical, and gives great ideas for developing a creative attitude toward all writing assignments.

*Interpretive Skills Lesson Plan: [Interpretive Writing](#)*, rev. by Peter Givens, 1992.

*Nature Writing Handbook: A Creative Guide*. Murray, John A. Sierra Club Books: San Francisco, CA, 1995. Includes the writing process, elements of style, and how to incorporate observation into writing.

*On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. Zinsser, William. Harper Collins: New York, NY, 1993. Zinsser gives solid, clear advice about writing nonfiction.

*Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers*. Barzun, Jacques. Harper and Row: New York, NY. Written for both writers and writing teachers with the goal of teaching writers to express themselves in ideas with effect and impact.

*Thinking on Paper*, Howard, V.A. and J.H. Barton, Quill/William Morrow: New York, NY, 1986. Includes "A User's Guide to Grammar and Punctuation." Outlines the writing process in detail.

*Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*. Goldberg, Natalie. Bantam Books: New York, NY, 1990. Provides suggestions to improve freedom and creativity in writing.

*Writing Down the Bones*. Goldberg, Natalie. Shambhala Publications: 1986. A good encouragement of basic writing skills and writing every day.

*Writing Without the Muse: 50 Beginning Exercises for the Creative Writer*. Joselow, Beth Baruch. Story Line Press: Brownsville, OR, 1995. Encourages the frustrated beginning writer to try several loosening-up exercises to get the juices flowing.

*Writing and Personality*. DiTiberio, John K. and George H. Jensen. Davis-Black: Palo Alto, CA, 1995.

### ***The Editing Process***

*Editing Your Newsletter: A Guide to Writing, Design, and Production*. Beach, Mark. Coast to Coast Books: Portland, OR, 1988. Offers guidance to the newsletter writer and editor.

*Getting the Words Right: How to Rewrite, Edit, and Revise*. Cheney, Theodore A. Rees. Writer's Digest Books: Cincinnati, OH, 1982. How to edit your own work, as well as that of others.

*Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing*. Cook, Clair Kehrwald, Houghton Mifflin: The Modern Language Association of America, 1985. Good, basic tips on editing your own work before sending it on for external review.

*Editors on Editing: What Writers Need to Know about What Editors Do*. Gross, Gerald, ed. Grove Press: New York, NY, 1993. Defines the editing process and includes perspectives on editing from editors of journalism, poetry, prose, and technical writing.

*Copy Editing: A Practical Guide*. Judd, Karen. Crisp Publications: Los Altos, CA, 1989. Solid

background and guidance for the beginning editor: takes the reader through the basics of the process.

*The Elements of Editing*. Plotnik, Arthur. Henry Holt: New York, NY, 1996. Focuses on how to edit others, including standard editing notations and techniques such as passive versus active voice.

*The Elements of Expression*. Plotnik, Arthur. Henry Holt: New York, NY, 1996. The importance of grammar and punctuation blended with development of your own style of writing.

*The Elements of Style and The Elements of Editing*. Strunk, Williams, and E.B. White. Macmillan Press: New York, NY, 1979. Concise view of style and usage. Perhaps the most widely used references for writing and editing.

*The New York Public Library Writer's Guide to Style and Usage*. Harper Collins: New York, NY, 1994.

## **SUGGESTED DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES**

1. As a pre-writing exercise, create a list of abstract words (intangibles and universal concepts) that appeal to you. (Examples: love, hate, greed, hunger, family, freedom, hope, money, sex, spirit). Write for eight minutes, using these words as guides and inspiration. At the end of the eight minutes, look at what you wrote and see what ideas emerge.
2. Choose a park resource and pre-write about it for five minutes: write all the thoughts and feelings you have about this resource without stopping to construct meaning about it. When you are done, examine your writing and find the basis for a good tangible/intangible link, and craft a theme statement.
3. Taking the theme you created from Exercise Two above, or a theme developed through that process, write a one-page draft essay. Incorporate feedback from peer and other editors to revise your first draft, striving for a final draft which is thematically structured and free of errors.
4. Keep a writing journal or file with ideas and raw material for future writing projects.

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## Component for Module 230

# Writing for Interpretive Media

### PURPOSE

This component examines interpretive writing for a variety of media, and explores the differences between prose intended to inspire and that which is primarily technical or scientific.

### OBJECTIVES

At the end of this component, participants will be able to:

- differentiate between three writing types;
- identify media characteristics that affect interpretive writing

### APPROACH

All good interpretive writing creates a catalyst for connecting the audience to the resource. In addition, good writing is tailored to the characteristics and constraints of the media used. Learners will recognize the differences between research, technical, and interpretive writing.

This component reinforces the interpretive equation presented in [Module 101: Fulfilling the NPS Mission--The Process of Interpretation](#). It also echoes the tenets of [Module 103: Preparing and Presenting an Effective Talk](#), working on the principle that the elements of an effective interpretive presentation should also be present in a piece of effective interpretive writing. Additionally, it incorporates concepts covered in *Module 102: Informal Interpretation*, particularly the component on research.

Interpretive writing potentially reaches outside park boundaries and provides opportunities to a diverse public (see [Module 110: Visitor Needs and Characteristics](#)), some of whom may never actually visit a specific site.

### CONTENT OUTLINE

#### I. Types of writing\*

A. Research (scientific or historical)

B. Technical and informational

C. Interpretive

#### II. Examples of interpretive media used to convey written messages

A. Exhibits

B. Brochures and site bulletins

C. Interpretive guide books

- D. Trail guides
- E. Signs
- F. Travelers' Information Station (TIS) messages
- G. Video or movie scripts
- H. Audio stations
- I. Web pages
- J. Park newspapers or trip planners
- K. Wayside exhibits
- L. Public service announcements (PSAs)
- M. Resource-based interpretive correspondence
- III. Examples of media characteristics that affect interpretive writing
  - A. Design constraints
  - B. Hierarchy of content presentation
  - C. Intended purpose of message
  - D. Word count requirements
  - E. Relationships to other media
  - F. Writing for the eye versus the ear
- IV. Examples of audience types
  - A. General audiences--as broad as possible
  - B. Children and adults of various ages
  - C. Ethnic, cultural, and national origin
  - D. Specific user groups--birders, backpackers, disabled, etc.
  - E. Education level
  - F. Critical or non-supportive audience

\* = See ["Supplemental Reading and Activities for Module 230"](#)

## **RESOURCES**

*Creating Environmental Publications.* Zehr, Jeffrey, and Michael Gross. University of Wisconsin, Stevens Points Press: Stevens Point, WI, 1992. A good, quick introduction to writing for the public while considering available space and design elements.

*Government Correspondence Manual*

*Government Style Manual.* U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 1984. This book contains information on the official style of government writing.

*Interpretive Skills Lesson Plans*, ["Interpretive Writing,"](#) rev., Peter Givens, 1992; ["Elements of Design,"](#) rev., Mark Wagner, 1992, instructional material.

*Interpreting Critical Natural Resource Issues in Canadian and United States Park Service Areas.* Whatley, Michael E., Natural Resources Report, U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service: Denver, CO, 1995. An excellent guide on how to write directed messages about critical issues to a target audience.

*Making Exhibit Labels: A Step-by-Step Guide.* Sorrell, Beverly, American Association for State and Local History: Nashville, TN, 1983.

*Reader Centered Writing.* Anderson, Paul.

*Signs, Trails, and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Places.* Trapp, Suzanne, Michael Gross, and Ron Zimmerman. University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point Press: Stevens Point, WI, 1992.

*Superintendent's Guide to Public Affairs*

*Technical Writing: A Reader-Centered Approach.* Anderson, Paul V. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: Orlando, FL, 1987. Writing as though you are talking with the reader, writing sentences your readers can easily understand, expressing the significance of your message.

## **SUGGESTED DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES**

1. Create a list of interpretive media found at your park. List the strengths and limitations for each medium that affect how you would write for that medium. Discuss this with a peer and your supervisor for perspectives.
2. Select a topic or theme found in several media in your park. Compare how the subject is handled within the constraints or opportunities of each medium. If possible, compare written to audio messages about the same topic.
3. Working with both your supervisor and resource management staff, select a piece of scientific, historical, or technical writing about a natural or cultural resource at your site. From this source, prepare interpretive text for a specific medium in your park. Work with resource management staff and your supervisor to ensure accuracy and meet identified needs of the medium. Save your drafts for comparison. *Note: This product may be submitted for certification.*

4. Work with your supervisor to obtain a resource-based inquiry/complaint which requires a written interpretive response. Work through the writing process to produce a final draft response.

*Note: This product may be submitted for certification.*

5. Select a piece of interpretive writing intended for a certain audience. Rewrite this piece for a different audience.

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## **Component for Module 230**

# **Professionalism**

### **PURPOSE**

This component introduces some of the professional, ethical, and legal considerations inherent in interpretive writing.

### **OBJECTIVES**

Upon completion of this component, learners will be able to:

- describe the public domain implications of writing for the government;
- explain the need to work within agency mission and policy boundaries;
- describe copyright law and citation guidelines for incorporating non-original work into a product;
- describe the implications of bias and libel in interpretive writing.

### **APPROACH**

As an interpretive writer, you need to write independently and with conviction, incorporating tenets of successful interpretation. Professionalism in interpretive writing requires continual practice, critical self review, constant awareness of bias, and an understanding of legal constraints. Writing for the government entails additional responsibilities: incorporation of agency policies and regulations, and an understanding of the difference between personal opinion and agency position.

Writing for an agency requires accepting various levels of revision and constructive criticism. Moving away from an emotional attachment to your writing during the editing stage allows for growth and improvement.

This component presents some of the basic elements of professionalism in interpretive writing, and encourages you to explore them in greater depth by talking with others and consulting the module's references.

### **CONTENT OUTLINE**

#### **I. Public domain, agency constraints, and copyright**

##### **A. Writing done on the job does not belong to you**

1. Government publications are part of the public domain. (Volunteer and paid authors need to understand that they are producing government publications.)
2. You are speaking not as an individual but as a representative of the agency. (You must work within mission parameters and other boundaries placed on you by the agency.)

3. You may, or may not, receive credit for authorship.

B. The work of others does not belong to you (or the government)

1. Plagiarism is illegal and unethical;

2. Restrictions exist on the use of copyrighted materials; proper citation and/or permission are required to use copyright-protected text, music, or images.

## II. Other Considerations

A. Libel--Laws protect individuals and institutions from having erroneous and unfair statements written about them;

B. Bias--Stereotypical and discriminatory language and treatment must be recognized and eliminated.

C. Multiple points of view--Writing must be assessed with regard to inclusion (multiple perspectives) and balance.

(For more information on professionalism, see ["Supplemental Reading and Activities for Module 230"](#))

## RESOURCES

Copyright information can be obtained from the U.S. Copyright Office or from their Web page at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/copyright/>

*The Chicago Manual of Style: Fourteenth Edition*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1993. An excellent resource book for professional writers and editors. Contains specific information on proper citation, copyright law, and fair use.

*The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*. French, Christopher W., ed. Addison-Wesley: Reading, MA, 1987. Many nagging mechanical questions are answered here, and there is an entire section on punctuation, in addition to information on libel.

*Guidelines for Bias-free Writing*. Schwartz, Marilyn. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN, 1995.

## SUGGESTED DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES

1. Find publications and exhibit text produced more than ten years ago. Analyze them in terms of bias, point of view, inclusion, balance, and agency position.

2. Consult a cooperating association manager or a library for current materials on copyright law. If you have access to the Internet, search there for background information on copyright law and restrictions. (See "Resources" for address).

3. Select a range of interpretive materials. Assess them from the point of view of the opposite

gender or another ethnic group. Determine the effectiveness of these products from this new point of view.

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